

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR AUTOMATED SELECTION OF EQUIPMENT FOR PURCHASE THROUGH INPUT OF USER DESIRED SPECIFICATIONS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This invention is an automated system and method for locating and purchasing products or services having desired characteristics. The invention is particularly useful in purchasing computer equipment and computer services, but is not limited to use in any one field.

Locating and purchasing equipment, especially technical products such as computer equipment, can be tedious and time-consuming. Each type of product may be available from several different manufacturers, and each manufacturer may sell its products through a large number of distributors. The prices of the products, in general, vary considerably from one manufacturer to another, even after taking into consideration the variations in the specifications of products of different makers. More importantly, the same product may be sold at widely disparate prices by different distributors. Thus, a user who wants to find a desired product, having a set of minimum specifications, at the lowest price, must consult the catalogs of a myriad of vendors, and may also need to spend considerable time on the telephone or in personal visits to stores. The difficulty of this process makes it unlikely that the average purchaser, or even the more sophisticated purchaser, will truly obtain the best price.

The process of purchasing products of various kinds has been eased somewhat by the introduction of computerized shopping systems. For example, the CompuServe Consumer Information Service provides a computerized shopping service known as the "Electronic Mall". The latter service allows a user to select a category of merchandise, and to place an order for certain items, listed on the system, within that category.

The computerized shopping services of the prior art make it convenient to order products, because the ordering can be done without a personal visit, a telephone call, or a written communication. But such electronic shopping services of the prior art have been limited to filling orders for products known in advance to the user. They do not provide much help to the user who is not sure about the products available, and their specifications, but who wants to search for products having the lowest price and which fulfill certain requirements. Thus, the systems of the prior art are essentially equivalent to the old method of consulting individual catalogs or visiting individual stores.

The present invention provides an automated system, which not only permits a user to order products or services directly by computer, but also allows the user to determine the best price available for a product or service meeting a set of specifications. Thus, the present invention provides a system which eliminates the need for the user to consult hundreds or thousands of suppliers.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention helps a user to locate and purchase goods or services having desired characteristics, and also having the best available price. The invention employs a computer, or equivalent, which is linked to a database containing information about products and services and the vendors who supply them. The data-

base may be located in the memory of the central computer, but could also be located elsewhere. In the preferred embodiment, there is a central computer which serves many users. The central computer may be located far away from all such users.

In practicing the invention, the user must first tell the system the general type of product or service desired. This step can be done by selecting an appropriate item from a menu. In response to the user's choice, the system displays a template which gives various technical criteria for the product or service. By filling in one or more spaces on this template, the user can tell the system the criteria to be deemed minimum requirements. The system then searches the database for all products or services, within the selected category, which fulfill these minimum requirements. Then the system displays, to the user, general information about the products or services retrieved.

Initially, the system shows the user certain basic information such as the manufacturer, model number, and range of available prices. This initial display also associates each product or service with an internal number, or other designator, which the user can employ to obtain further information.

When the user enters the number or identifier of a product or service appearing on the above-described display, the system shows the user the names of the suppliers from whom that product or service can be obtained. The system also shows the user the prices available from each supplier. At the user's request, the system can also display a set of more detailed specifications for the chosen product or service.

The user can then order a product through the system by selecting one of the retrieved products by its identifier. The system prompts the user for the information necessary to complete the transaction. The system then generates the appropriate documents for recording the transaction, and, if necessary, forwards the documents to the selected supplier. The order can also be transmitted to the supplier electronically.

Other features of the system allow the user to receive announcements about new products or services, to communicate complaints or suggestions to management or to a particular supplier, or to receive help in using the system. The user can also obtain detailed information about the requirements and policies of a particular vendor.

The present system and method therefore enable the user to shop for products or services having particular specifications, and having the lowest price. The user does not need to consult the individual catalogs of suppliers, and can do all the shopping from a computer or terminal located virtually anywhere. The user can quickly and easily find the product or service having the lowest price, and having the required specifications.

It is therefore an object of the invention to simplify and automate the process of locating and purchasing products or services having desired characteristics.

It is another object to provide a system and method for selecting and/or purchasing products and/or services.

It is another object to provide a system which replaces a plurality of catalogs, and which greatly reduces the time required in shopping for products or services.

It is another object to provide a system and method as described above, wherein a user can easily shop for equipment, having specified characteristics, from a plu-